

After-school programming vital to students, families, and society

In 2004-05, the 110 schools in Wisconsin's 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CLCs) collaborated with 541 community partners to deliver quality after-school and extended learning opportunities. These include safe environments for learners, tutoring, academic enrichment, and community-based youth development programs. Research documents the value of these programs for students, for society, and for economic productivity. Yet, in the hours after school, too many youth are left on their own because Wisconsin, like states across the nation, lacks adequate after-school programming to keep our children safe as we extend learning.

Law enforcement authorities report that in the hours after the end of the school day juvenile crime triples. However, national studies tell us that when young people have access to high-quality after-school programs, rates of vandalism, drug use, addiction, teen sex, pregnancy, and other risky behaviors are reduced.

Students in quality after-school programming are under the supervision of adults who care about them and who can provide guidance for the hours until their parents finish working. Few households have one parent who works and one home to care for children, yet our social programs have not caught up with this cultural fact of American life.

Despite school and community partnerships to deliver quality after-school programs, more than 100 communities were denied federal CLC grants last year due to lack of funding. Those schools that received grants report they couldn't serve all of the students who need their services, also because of insufficient funds. This year's federal budget proposal, recently announced by President Bush, offers even less funding for CLC programs in the coming years, which will leave an estimated 25,500 Wisconsin children without services.

After-school programs following the CLC model offer homework help and tutoring services; academic enrichment, arts, music, and cultural activities; recreational activities; and opportunities for young people to practice valuable life skills such as leadership, collaboration, and problem-solving. Grade reports related to the state's CLCs showed improved academic performance in math and reading, and teacher surveys documented a significant increase in homework completion, attendance, motivation, and appropriate behavior from students who attend a CLC.

A national evaluation of CLC programs indicated that mothers of students participating in after-school programs were more likely to be in the labor force. It is stressful for working parents to worry about care for their children after school. Stress contributes to decreased productivity at the work place. When children are in safe, quality after-school programs, parents can focus on work rather than worrying about their children.

This is all solid evidence to support the concept of and funding for after-school programming. The bottom line is that after-school programs work. They work for students and their academic achievement and safety. They work for families, and they work for our economy. After-school programming helps in our efforts to raise achievement for all students and to close the achievement gap. They are clearly one of the best investments we can make as a state and as a country.